

# Uncommon Ground: Military Police Combat Command

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*In the fall of 2004, the area between the Farah Province and the Herat Province in Afghanistan was imploding. Local warlords were fighting for status, which resulted in force-on-force battles and significant loss of life. The fully equipped warlord militias had refused to turn in their weapons under the demilitarization rules emplaced by the coalition and the new government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the coalition was unable to provide the forces needed to prevent the fighting among the militias. As the fighting escalated, the increased loss of Afghani lives forced the coalition to move a US air cavalry unit to Shindand to stand between two fighting warlords and their well-armed militias. The movement was dangerous but necessary for regional stability. The cavalry unit was well-equipped and trained for the mission. Its air assets and cavalry scouts provided great battlefield maneuver options and aided in its mission to find and capture or kill the enemy.*

Battle plans change in most conflicts and this one was no exception. The Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF)-76 commander decided that the cavalry unit's assets were needed elsewhere. This vacancy presented a unique problem for the theater commander. The insertion of the cavalry had stopped the immediate fighting and the warlords were cooperating. However, the area was still unstable and no ground maneuver units were immediately available to fill the gap that would be left by the departure of the cavalry. The answer to the problem would be unusual—a military police battalion commander would command an airfield, and two military police companies would divide the empty battlespace and become combat maneuver elements.

On 28 March 2004, Soldiers of the 551st Military Police Company deployed to Afghanistan, where they conducted the five functions of the Military Police Corps. The most common mission was maneuver and mobility support operations. Platoons moved to other locations to perform a multitude of military police tasks and force protection missions. The unit was known as the “can do” company, completing every mission assigned. The company was responsible for conducting prisoner escorts and launching several air assaults to seize and secure weapons caches. In January 2005, the 716th Military Police Battalion Headquarters joined the 551st Military Police Company. As the company planned its redeployment, the Soldiers of the 716th and the 551st would yet again answer the call.

In today's contemporary operational environment, the military police are continually required to conduct combat support operations under increasingly uncommon circumstances. Moving an established combat tactical operation center (TOC) from one location to another is a difficult undertaking, but moving cross-country on short notice in order to plan and execute combat operations in the place of combat arms units is even more difficult. In January 2005, the 716th Military Police Battalion Headquarters, the 551st Military Police Company, and the 209th Military Police Company received the order to execute this uncommon task. This was new ground for military police Soldiers. For the first time in recent history, a military police battalion and two military police companies would command and control battlespace on foreign soil in a combat environment.

In late January 2005, the 551st Military Police Company received a warning order to move its headquarters and two platoons to Shindand. The company quickly completed all the necessary preparations and successfully arrived at Shindand Air Field on 1 February. After only two days, the company had established a TOC and begun executing a variety of combat missions. In those two days, the company was working with Task Force Peacekeeper to establish a clear mission set. The company knew that its mission was to control the Shindand District, one of the largest districts in Afghanistan. For the first time in recent history, a military police company commander

operated as a ground combat commander. The cavalry unit that the military police unit was replacing was much larger and had aviation assets, which allowed it to control the area with ease. However, the 551st was responsible for controlling the same space with less than half the personnel and without the aviation assets. All of these factors significantly affected the mission focus and execution.

One of the company's main missions was to strengthen and support the local government. The area was incredibly poor and had received little attention from the central government, making the stabilization of the district a difficult mission. In addition to these challenges, the regional warlords constantly attempted to undermine the local government in order to strengthen their own power in the area. The battalion commander divided the battlespace into northern and southern areas of operations (AOs). The southern AO was identified as the main effort.

Upon completion of the mission, the company had conducted nearly 100 combat and combat support missions and trained more than 100 Afghanistan police. Counterrocket reconnaissance patrols discovered more than 20 caches of weapons and ammunitions that contained more than 3,000 mortar rounds; rockets; land mines; and rocket-propelled grenades. They also uncovered large quantities of small arms and small arms ammunition. The seizure of more than two tons of weapons and munitions undoubtedly hindered the enemy's ability to freely operate in the AO. In addition, the company executed many civil affairs projects, including the development of wells, communications, and reliable electricity, all of which will have a profound impact on the Shindand District.